

**Homily for Ash Wednesday  
February 13, 2013**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today we are marked with a cross of ashes. We are once again in a season of a little fasting, hopefully some charitable almsgiving, some respectable abstinence from meat today and on the Fridays of Lent, and a great many fish fries! That cross, made from the remnants of last year's blessed palms, will be invisible by morning, if not sooner.

Our challenge? To remember that we stood in line to accept that cross and to live a life marked by that cross, even when—especially when—it's invisible to others.

At the beginning of this sacred season of Lent, it is good for us to recall the purpose of this Year of Faith. In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, the Door of Faith, Pope Benedict stressed that this year "is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world."<sup>1</sup> As such, this Year of Faith has the same purpose, the same goal,

as these coming forty days of Lent; both are given to us as a profound opportunity to renew our attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we turn back to the Lord with ever greater devotion in this sacred season, especially on this Ash Wednesday, we must remember what the Holy Father also wrote:

One thing that will be of decisive importance in this Year is retracing the history of our faith, marked as it is by the unfathomable mystery of the interweaving of holiness and sin. While the former highlights the great contribution that men and women have made to the growth and development of the community through the witness of their lives, the latter must provoke in each person a sincere and continuing work of conversion in order to experience the mercy of the Father which is held out to everyone.<sup>2</sup>

In this Year of Faith, in this season of Lent, we must prayerfully examine our lives and search for those signs of both holiness and sin. We must seek to attune our ears to hear the Lord's summons to "return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning," to enter through the door of faith that leads to his mercy (Joel 2:12).

We must never forget that we are sinners, but we must also never forget the Lord's desire to forgive the sins of his repentant children. Yes, we have indeed sinned; we have done what is evil in the sight of God, and we do well to acknowledge our guilt and implore the Lord's mercy (cf. Psalm 51:6). He has called us back to himself and given us the means of reconciliation. However great and manifold the number of our sins may be, so much greater is the mercy of God; no sin is beyond his love!

This humble confidence in the Lord's gracious kindness has led us to cry out before his altar with the very words He has given to us in Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;  
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.  
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt  
and of my sin cleanse me (Psalm 51:3-4).

Let us not shy away from His love, but let us instead hasten to receive the gift of His forgiveness, the gift beyond all compare!

When he reflected on this Psalm that King David wrote in true sorrow for his great sins, Saint John Fisher said that our souls can be compared to a tablet, to a slate, on which nothing is written. Though

nothing is yet written on it, it is marked and scuffed by our many sins and lacks the beauty God intends for it. Therefore, the holy Bishop says:

...it is necessary that it should be scraped, washed, and wiped. It shall be scraped by the inward sorrow and compunction of the heart when we are sorry for our sin; it shall be washed with tears from our eyes when we acknowledge and confess our sin; and lastly, it will be wiped and made clean when we try to make amends and do satisfaction by good deeds for our sins. These three things come without doubt from the gracious pity of God: you are sorry for your sins - it is a gift of almighty God; you acknowledge your sin by weeping and wailing for it - it is a gift of almighty God; you are active in good works to do satisfaction - this also is a gift of almighty God.<sup>3</sup>

If we offer our souls to God, he can take the tarnished tablet of our soul and make of it a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, on which He can paint the beautiful image of His love in Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Saint John Fisher, *Exposition of the Seven Penitential Psalms*, Anne Barbeau Gardiner, ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 102-103.